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## Formative feedback and writing assessment: any evidence of learning?

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# Formative feedback and writing assessment: any evidence of learning?

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*Assessment for learning and assessment of learning:*  
*Incommensurate paradigms or complementary perspectives? BAAL*  
TEA SIG Conference, University of Reading, 11 March 2016

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Life-changing Learning  
.....

# An overview

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- Why research tutor feedback and assessment
- Research context
- Data collection tools
- Analytical tools
- Key findings
- Conclusion and implications
- Comments and questions



# Why research tutor feedback & assessment (1)



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- Assessment and feedback central to Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning
- Low student satisfaction of assessment and feedback in HE (HEFCE, 2010)
- Understanding of student learning experience better
- Exploration of what supports and hinders when providing feedback to students (Hyland, 2013)
- Higher Education Academy's focus on assessment and feedback in Higher Education (HE) - funding (2012/13)



# Why research tutor feedback & assessment (2)

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- Examination of how dialogic feedback on assessment in HE works (Nicol, 2010; Shrestha, 2011)
- Usability of tutor feedback (Walker, 2009)
- Limited research in EAP/ ESP regarding tutor feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006)
- Little research on UK home students' academic literacy development and formative feedback
- Understanding students' and teachers' perceptions of feedback in the module, building on my previous study (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012)

# Research questions

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- What are the open and distance academic literacy students' perceptions of assessment and formative feedback?
- To what extent, do these students develop academic writing through formative feedback on assignments?

# Research context

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- Undergraduate English for business studies purposes module (LB160) in an open and distance learning context
- Focus on academic literacy (reading and writing)
- A large cohort of students, mainly home students (over 1300 in 2013)
- 42 tutors
- Mainly asynchronous tutor support
- First assignment serving formative purposes towards the second assignment
- Case study based assignments
- Marking criteria shared with students through module materials (*use of source materials; text structure and development; academic style; grammar, punctuation and spelling; quality of presentation*)

# Data collection tools

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- Student survey
- Telephone student interviews, incentives provided (a £10 book voucher each)
- Telephone tutor interviews
- Student assignments (first and second)
- Tutor feedback on each interviewee student's two assignments



# Data collection

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- Student survey (22 responded out of 250, 14 full response)
- Survey participant demographic data:
  - age – 22 – 55; 11 male and 11 female
  - 17 white, 3 black, 1 mixed, 1 unknown
  - 16 with 3 A Levels;
  - 17 high socio-economic status
- Assignment 1 score 56% or over; Assignment 2 score 58% or over
- Student interviews (8)
- Tutor interviews (6)
- Student assignments (8 x 2= 16)
- Tutor feedback on two assignments (16)
- Module assessment materials

# Assignment questions

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## Assignment 1 (eTMA1)

Read the case study below and produce **a summary of the case study text**. The summary should be between 250 and 300 words. If it is longer, your tutor will only mark up to 300 words.

After you have completed the summary, **underline all the key concepts** that you have in the summary. Please note that because it is a summary, you may find there are several key concepts in each sentence and in each paragraph.



# Assignment questions

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## Assignment 2 (eTMA2)

Use the SWOT framework of analysis to critically examine the internal and external environment of Brompton Bicycle as described in the case study. Provide recommendations to Brompton Bicycle about future actions they should take for business success.

Complete the task by reading and analysing the case study that follows and the three expert opinions at the end. ***Take into account your tutor's feedback on eTMA 01 in writing this analysis.***

You should submit your assignment by the given deadline. Your assignment should not exceed 800 words. Any figures or diagrams should be included in the body of the main text and will form part of the total word count.

# Assignment questions

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- Extensive guidance notes
- Expected genre:
  - Assignment 1 – summary
  - Assignment 2 – case study analysis/ report [Introduction ^ SWOT table^ Explanation/ analysis^ Recommendations]

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats



# Analytical tools

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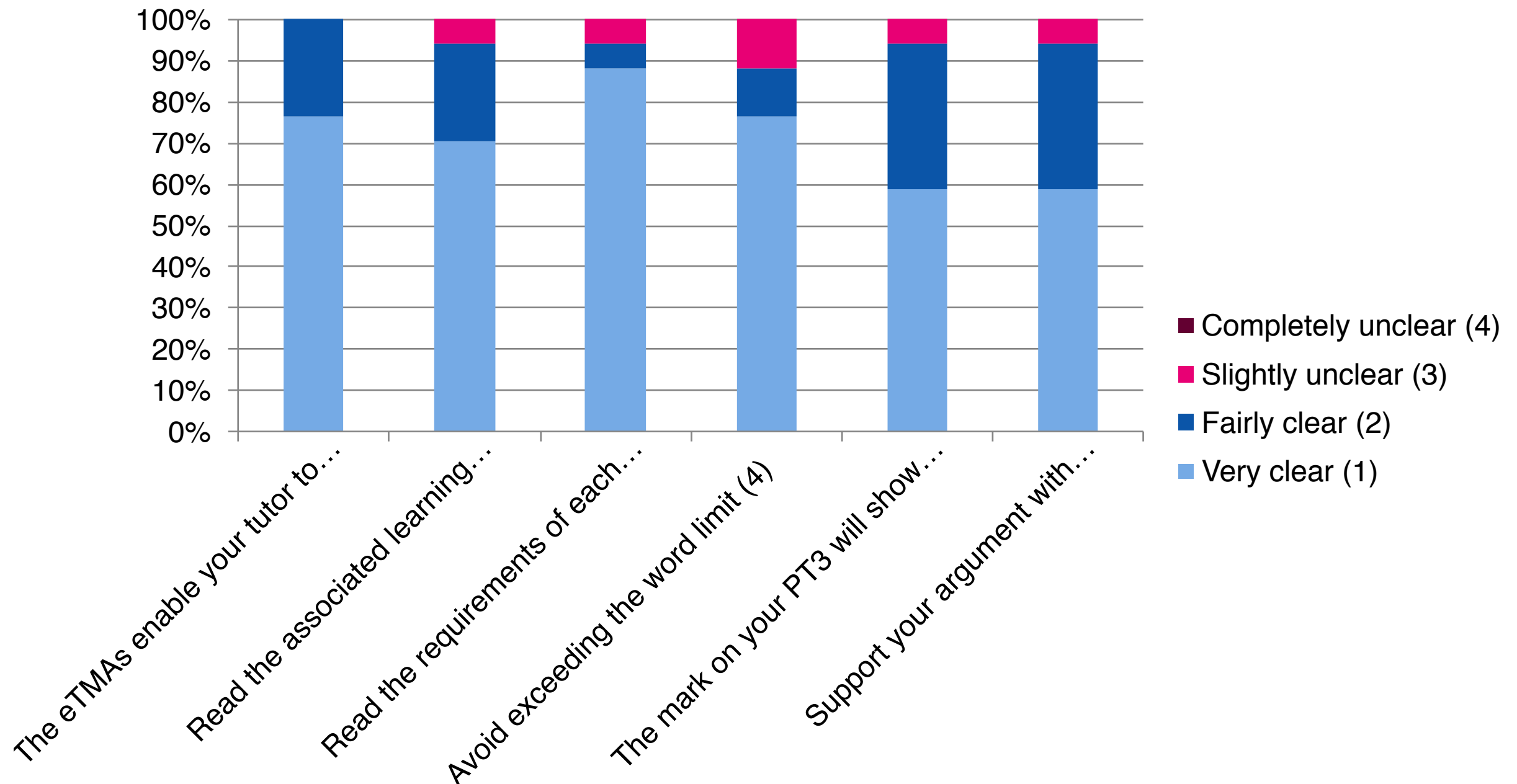
- Statistical analysis of survey data
- Thematic analysis of interview data
- Hyland and Hyland's (2006) framework (interpersonal) adapted and extended to analyse tutor feedback
- Analysis of student text complexity ([www.Textinspector.com](http://www.Textinspector.com) )
- Genre analysis of student assignments (analysis in progress)





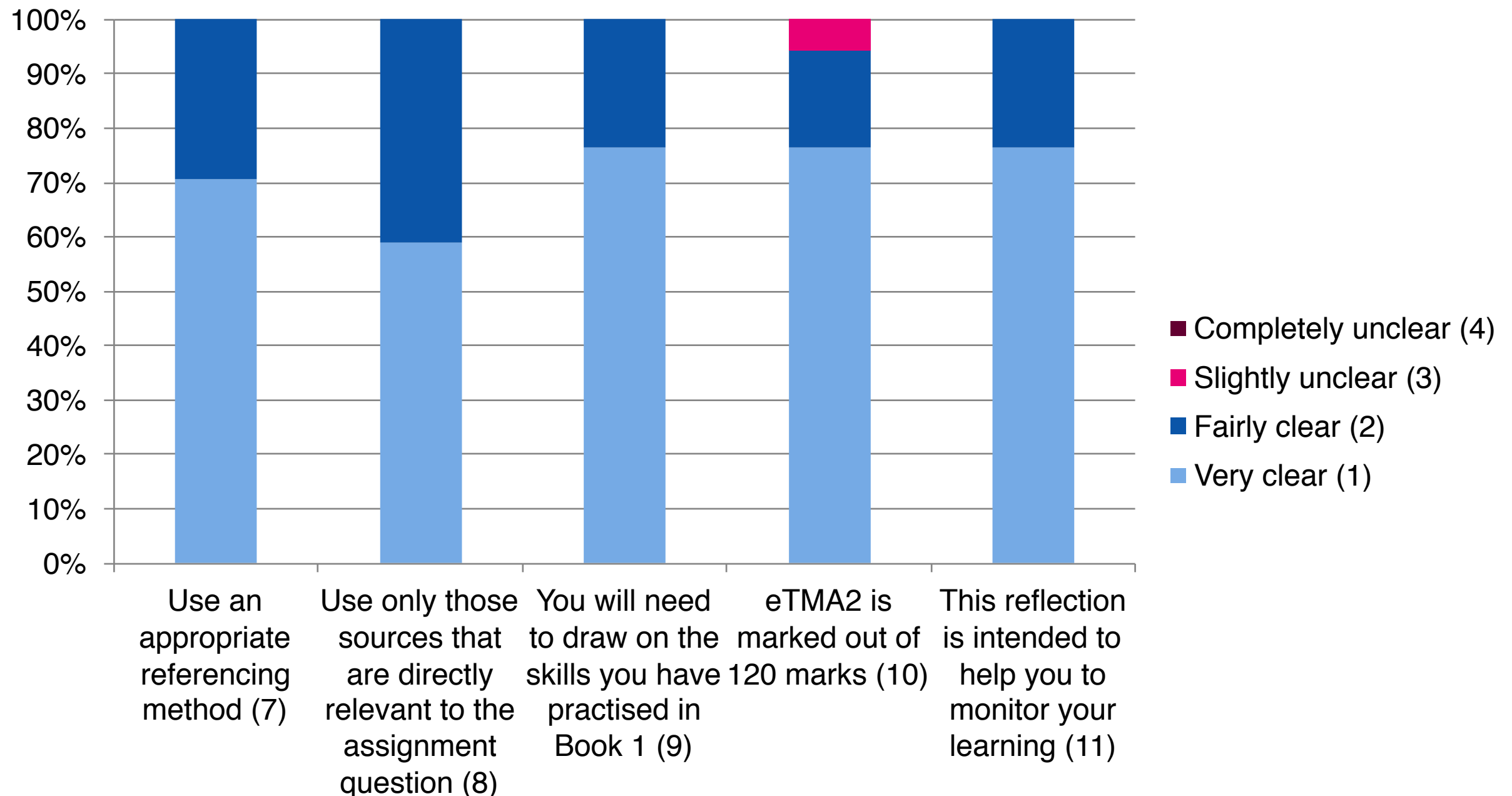
# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Clarity of language used in assessment documents



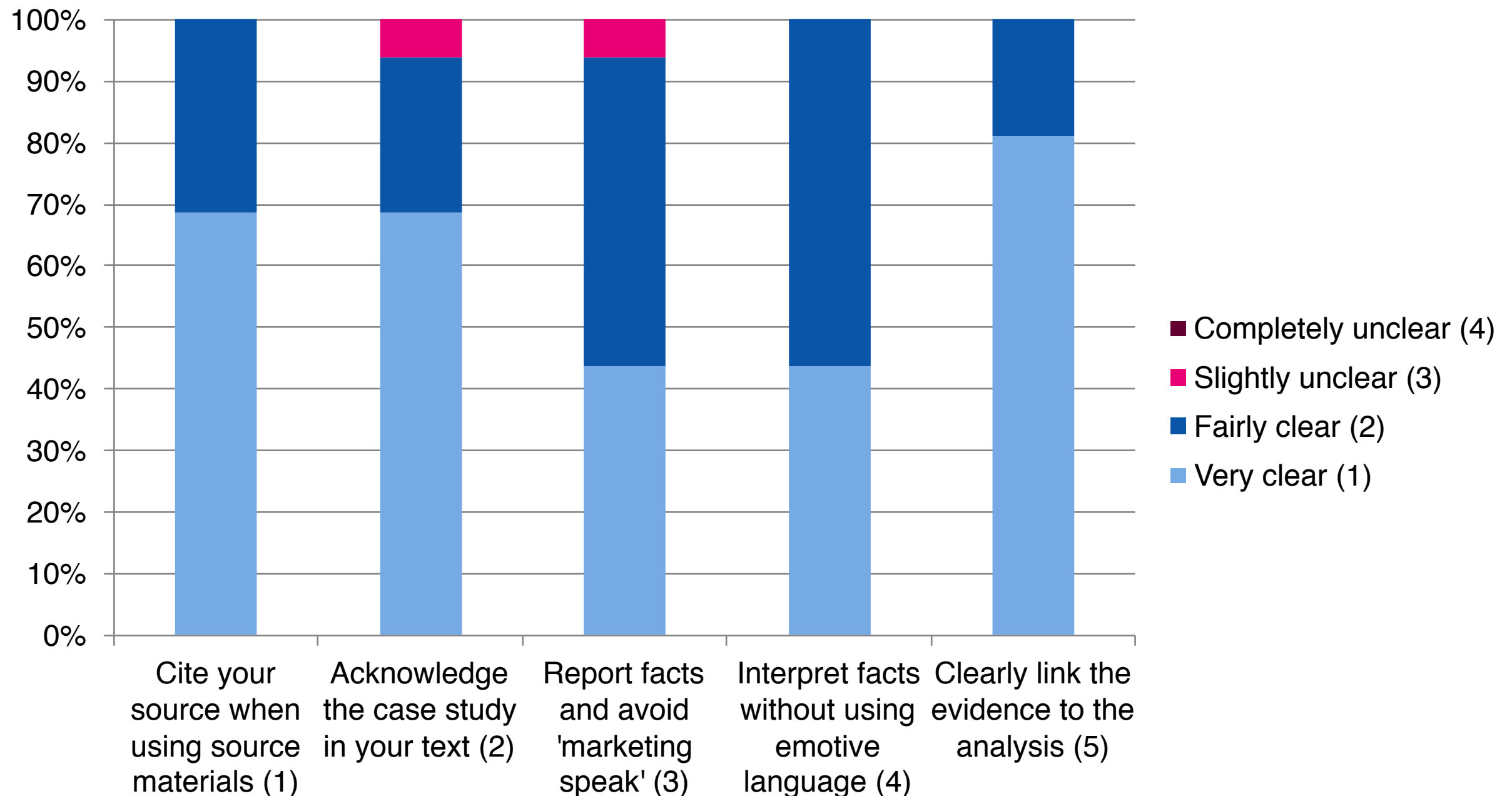
# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Clarity of language used in assessment documents



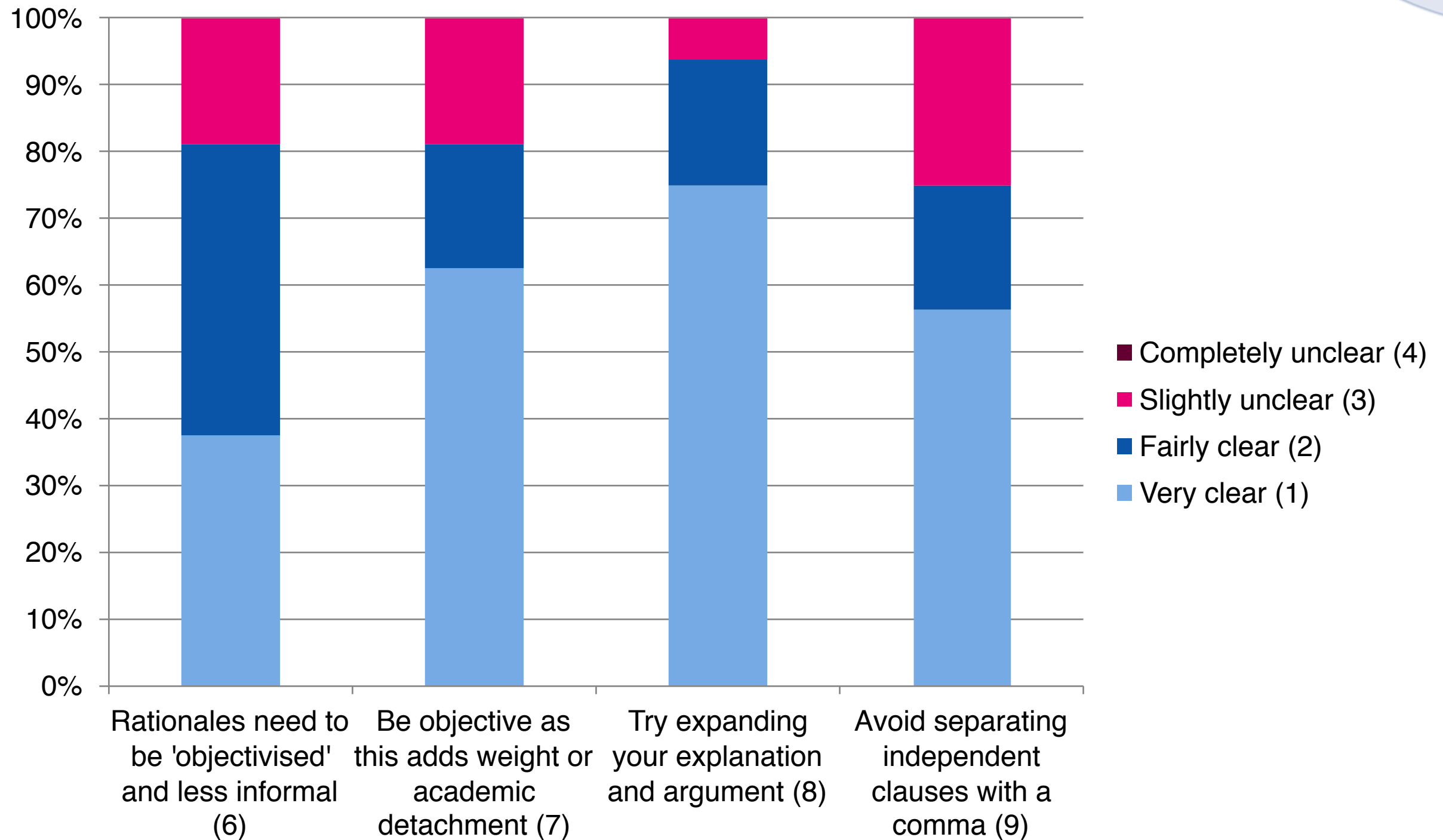
# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Clarity of typical tutor comments on assignment



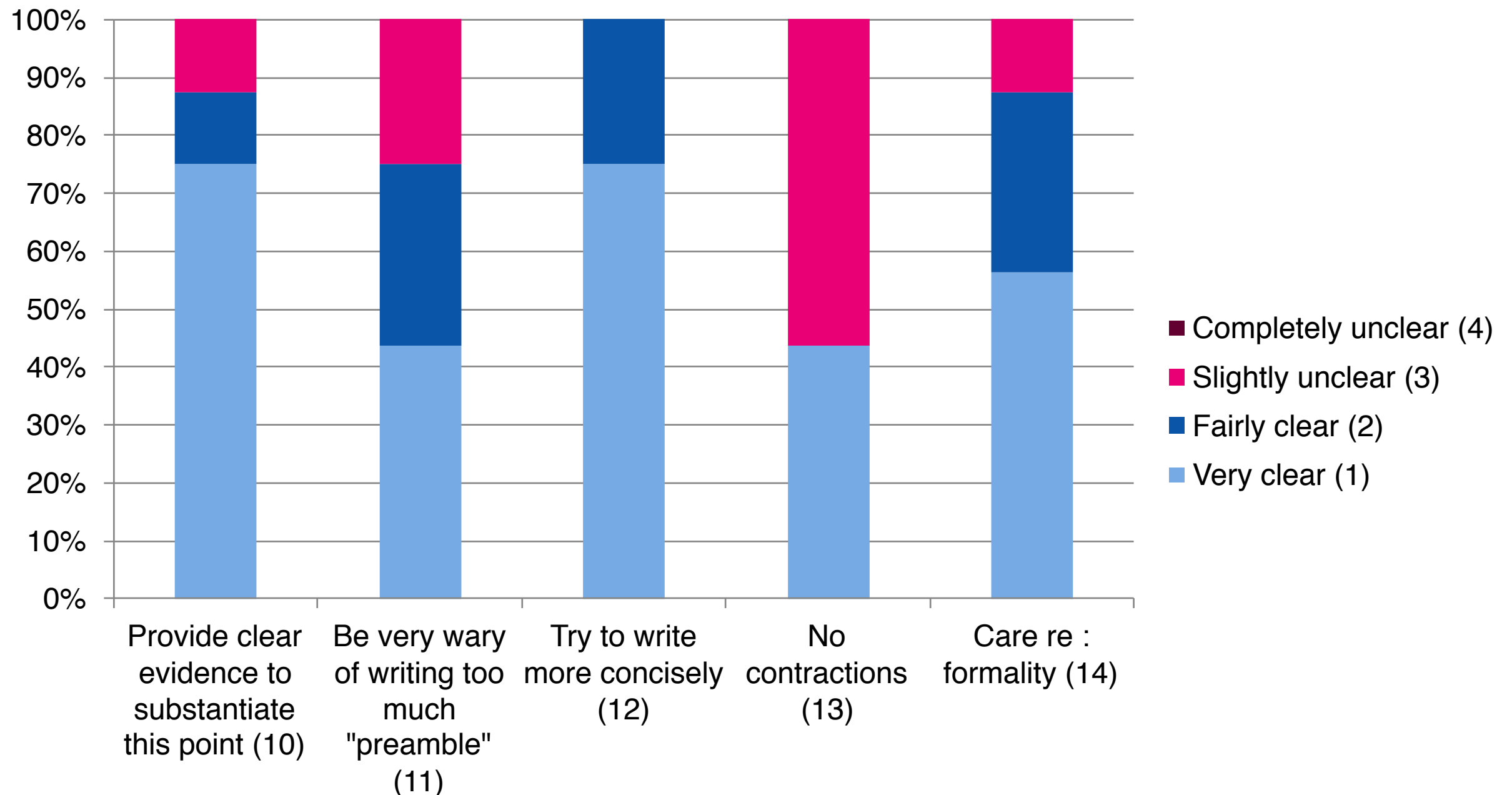
# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Clarity of typical tutor comments on assignment



# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

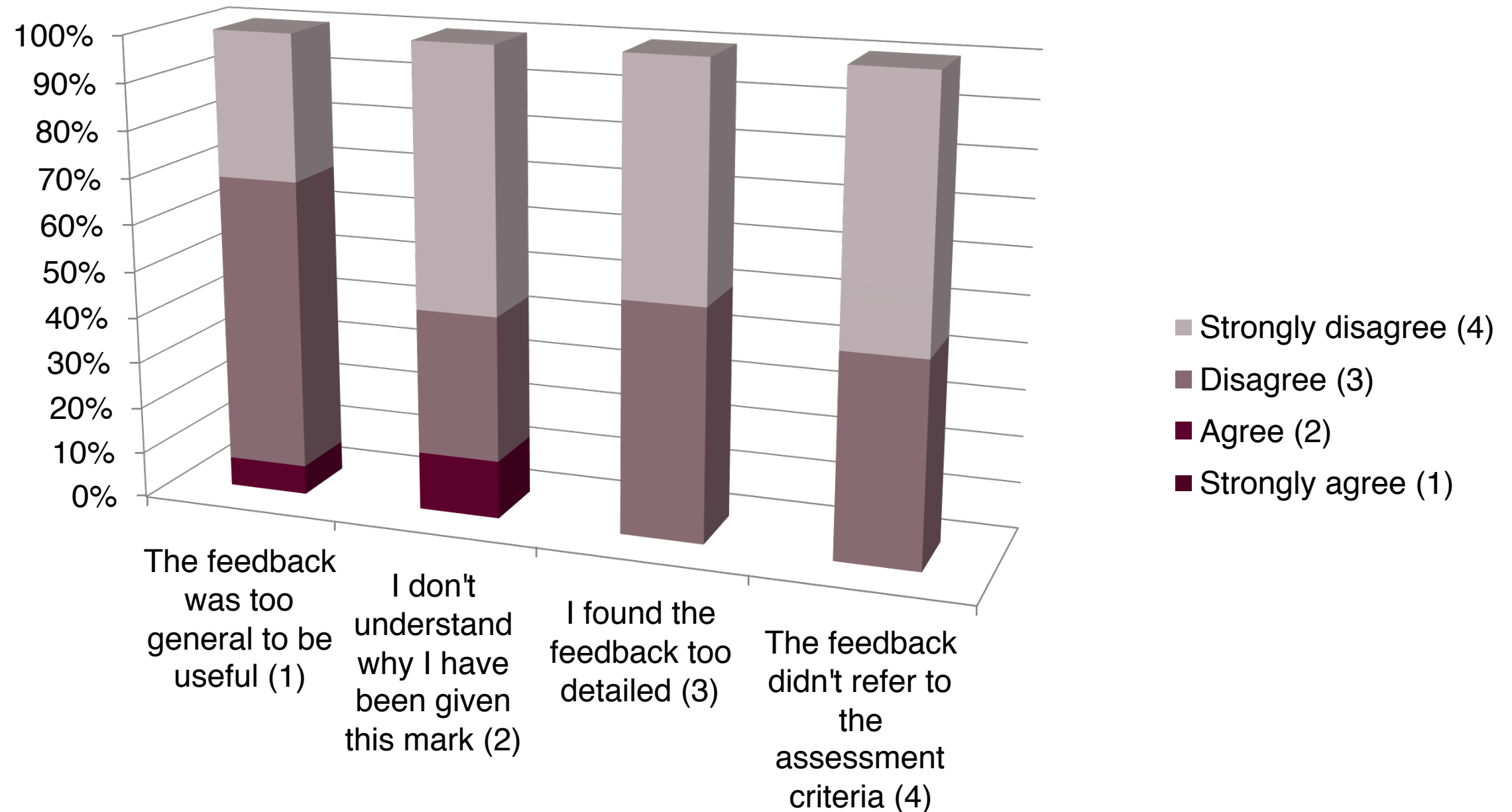
## Clarity of typical tutor comments on assignment





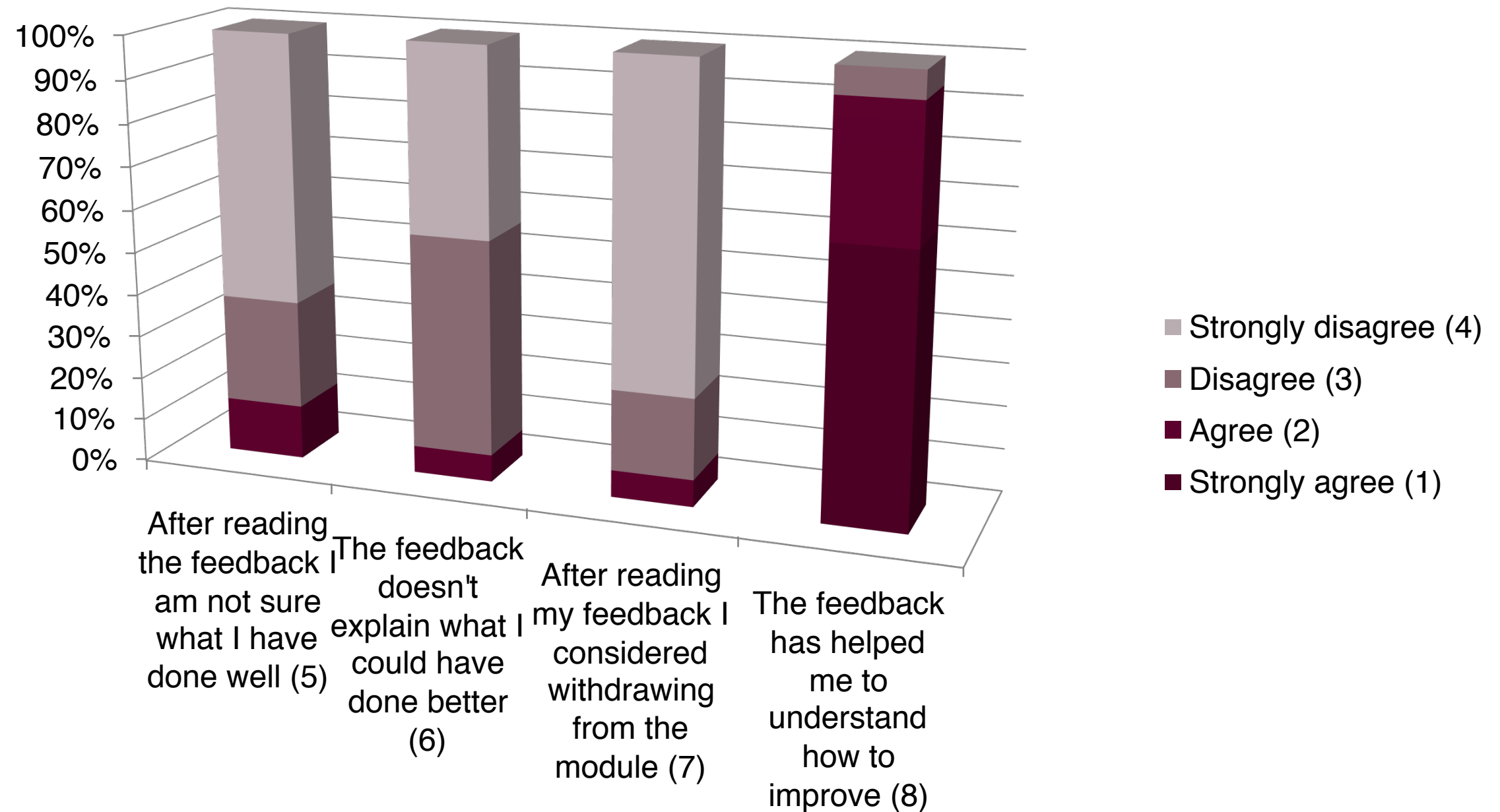
# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Perceptions of specific feedback on two LB160 assignments



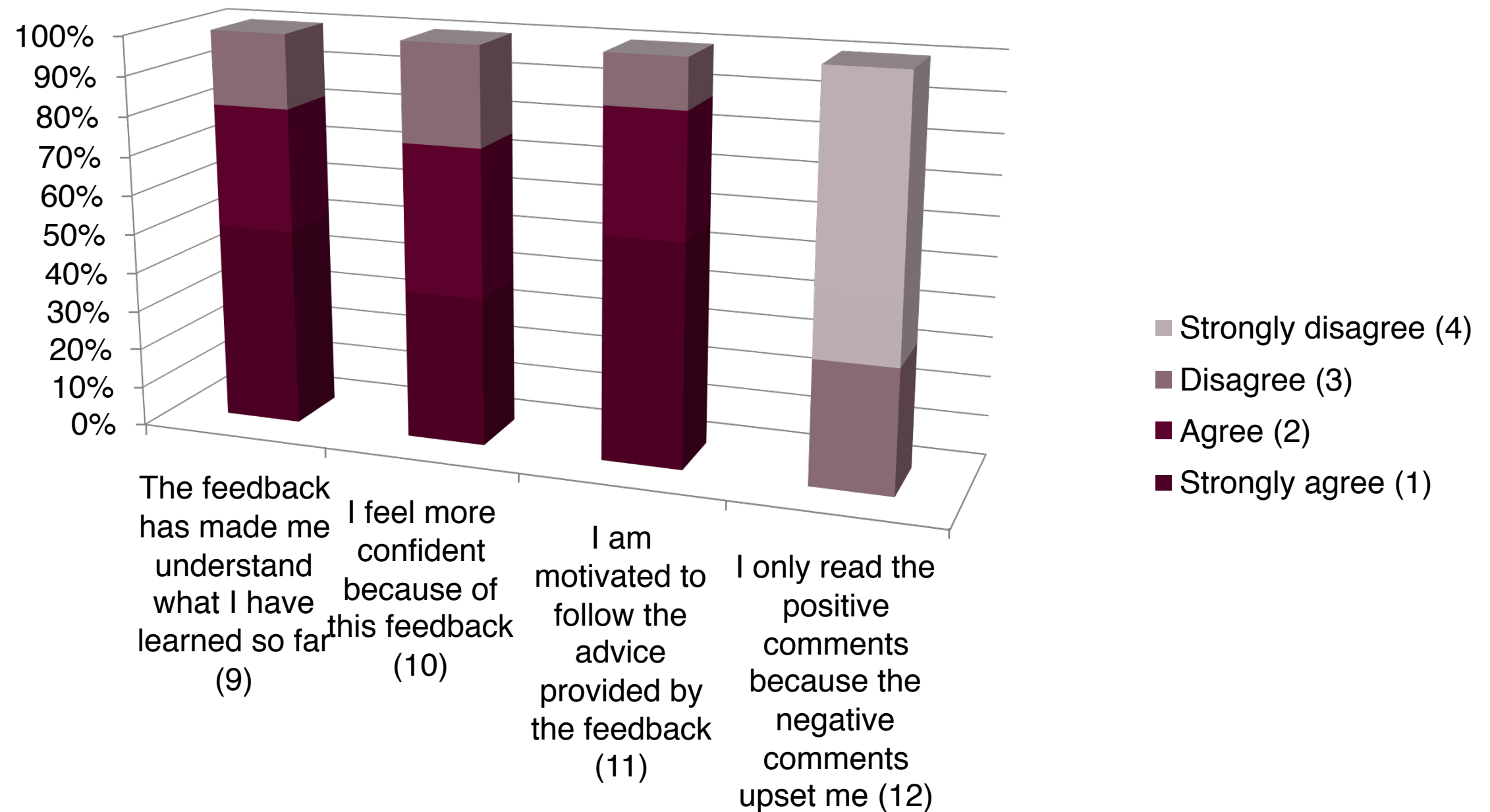
# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Perceptions of specific feedback on two LB160 assignments



# Key findings: student perceptions (survey)

## Perceptions of specific feedback on two LB160 assignments



# Student perceptions survey: summary

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- Evidence of module assessment materials being clear and supportive
- Many students (56%) not aware of how to interpret and use tutor feedback
- Key functions of tutor feedback: overall evaluation of their work; provide detailed comments and explain how to improve their writing
- Most tutor comments clear BUT meta-language and technical terms including comments that lack contextual information less helpful
- Feedback comments on two assignments mostly clear, motivating and usable though some students finding them too general, less helpful and not engaging

# Student perceptions: interviews (x8)

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- Assessment tasks clear and guidance supportive and ‘straightforward’
- Learning from summary feedback: make notes and use in future assignments (usability)
- Not concerned about lost marks if secured a high score
- Most tutor comments on two assignments clear and related to relevant marking criteria
- Most useful comments on paragraphing, sentence structure and presentation
- Need for personalised targeted feedback
- Preference for a summary of strengths and weaknesses at the end
- Some students unsure of the rationale behind their marks on the assignment



# Student quotes

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‘In part A [use of source materials] I think I got twenty two out of twenty five and then it just says “Information is correct and appropriate” so I’m not really sure where I lost those three marks. But in the other questions, you know, it’s “Make sure you’re doing this” and it’ll mainly explain where I lost marks. ... I think it’s difficult that sometimes the tutor will put in sort of a generalised what they were looking for but then not necessarily comment on whether you’ve done that or not...’ Celine

‘Yeah I find the marking criteria probably the most useful of all the information provided. And like it makes you, you can be more specific to the task in hand rather than thinking if you’re not quite answering as it should be.’ Dave

# Tutor perceptions: interviews (x6)

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- Confirmation of student perceptions of assessment tasks and guidance
- Challenging to students due to time management skills
- Important to link feedback with marking criteria directly
- Models or examples better than lengthy explanations
- Tutor feedback valued by students but engagement dependent on conciseness, clarity and affective impact
- First assignment (summary) probably not appropriate preparation for the second one (SWOT analysis/ report) except focusing on key concepts and making notes

# Tutor quotes

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‘But maybe if there’s one thing I’d say, you know, that perhaps is a problem for students is that they focus too much of their attention on actually trying to work out the answer. So when it comes to writing they go back perhaps to their old ways of writing essays. So they’re not actually then using the skills that they’ve learnt if they’re spending so much time trying to work out the answer.’

... And certainly feedback that students have given me say that they find that [detailed feedback] really helpful because they start the module unaware of things that they’re doing in their writing when they get to the end of the module they’re, you know, they’re doing things almost automatically and they’re things that they would never even consider but they can see that their marks are improving on other modules or their boss has said something about the drafts that they write at work.’ Darron

# Tutor feedback on assignments

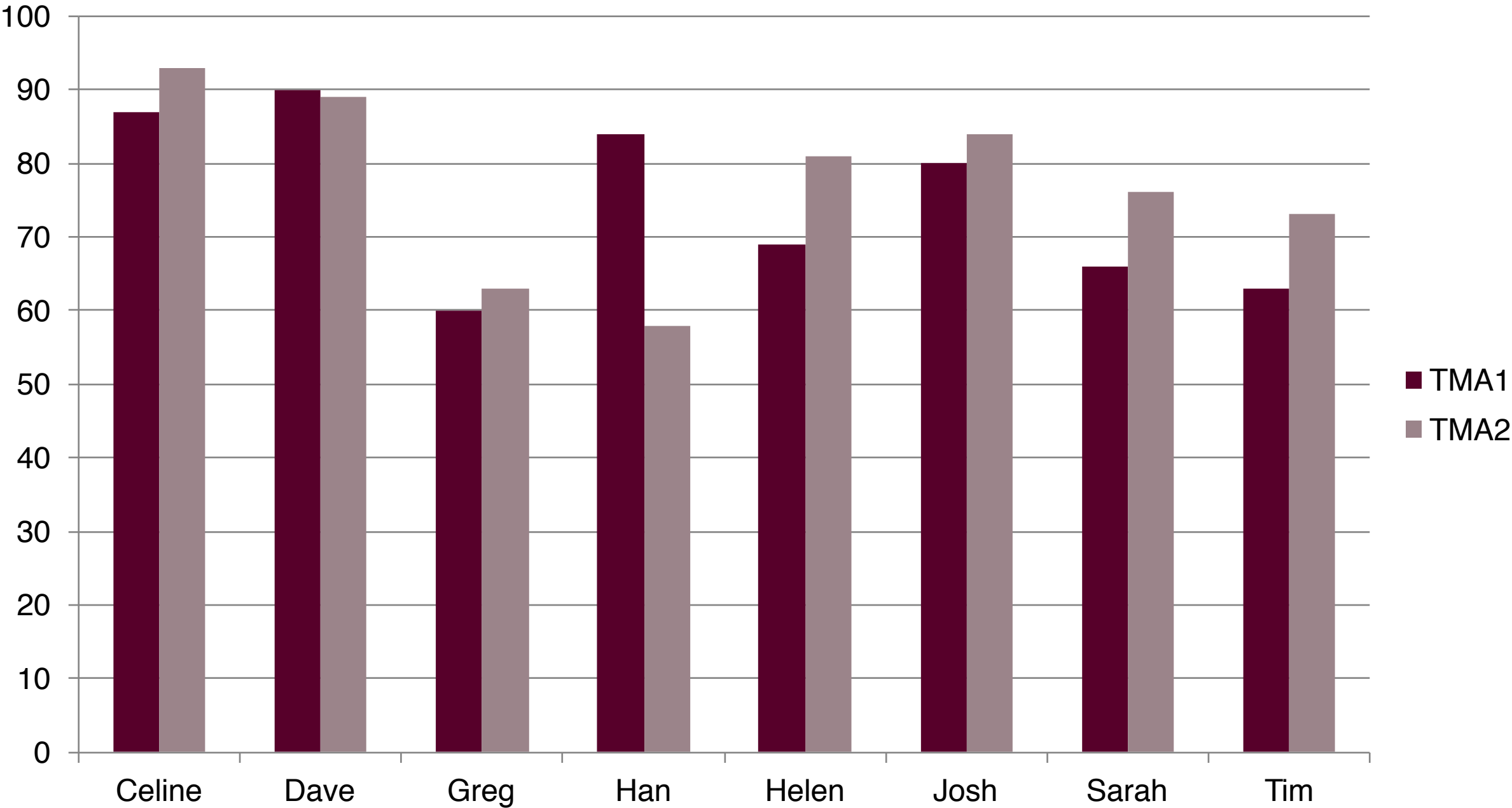
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## Length of feedback

Length	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Comment
Lowest number	221 words	403 words	Less experienced tutors
Highest number	1011 words	1833 words	More experienced tutors
Total words	4,489 words	6,882 words	
Average	561.125	860.25	

# Interviewee students' assignment scores





# Organisation and functions of tutor feedback

- Focus on interpersonal dimension (Hyland & Hyland, 2006)
- Extension of Hyland and Hyland (2006); cf. (Starfield et al., 2015)
- Genre of tutor feedback: a number of stages observed in the summary feedback

Stages	Functions
Orientation^	Greet Acknowledge Preview: what the feedback will be about
Feedback^ (Criterion A^ Criterion B^ Criterion C^ Criterion D^ Criterion E^)	State criterion State strengths (praise) Explain problems/ weaknesses (criticise) Suggest ways of improving (exemplify) Recommend resources
[Recap^]	Summarise key points in the feedback
Recommendations^	Recommend/ Suggest ways of improving
[Acknowledgement^ + Praise^ + Suggestion^ + Encouragement]	Acknowledge/ praise/ encourage
Closing	Close (e.g., Best wishes, Name)

# Organisation and functions of tutor feedback

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- Nevertheless, these stages not present in all the tutors' feedback
- More experienced tutors tending to provide more detailed longer feedback than those new to the module; students in favour of the former
- Tutor feedback mostly clear and useful to students though varied among tutors in terms of quality and quantity
- Most tutors' feedback developmental and supportive
- A lack of reference to previous feedback comments in the second assignment
- Thus, potentially diminishing the value of developmental feedback and missing the opportunity to maintain the feedback dialogue and address any student needs (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012)
- Frequent reference to 'essay' genre for Assignment 2 which is a case study analysis or report

# Examples of tutor feedback



## Celine's tutor feedback (Assignment 1)

### A: 22/25

Use of source material: Information from the source material is correct and appropriate for the task

### B: 20/25

Structure and development of the text: The structure and development of the text is clear and appropriate to its purpose.

The instructions were to underline the key concepts, which was important to helping you organise your summary. **Next time, consider** exactly which words represent the key concepts, rather than underlining so many sentences and phrases.

# Examples of tutor feedback



## Greg's tutor feedback (Assignment 1)

Hello Greg,

**Well done for writing and submitting your first TMA for your new Open University module, LB160.** The aim of this TMA was to write in your own words a summary of the case study text on Brompton Bicycle.

[...]

**B: 12/25**

Structure and development of the text: The structure and development of the text is clear and appropriate to its purpose

**You have written in sentences and have grouped them together to try to form paragraphs.** **However**, have a look at my comments on your script. **Work on** writing sentences which weigh and balance information. **Try using links** such as 'although' and 'however' which could create contrasts and suggest evaluation of the business. **Work on** linking information so that your paragraphs begin to create an argument. **Avoid** over-generalising or writing a series of statements. There **needs to be sufficient detail** in a summary to create a text which develops information and establishes an argument supported by evidence.

# Examples of tutor feedback

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## Celine's tutor feedback (Assignment 2)

**B: 22/25**

Structure and development of the text: The structure and development of the text is clear and appropriate to its purpose.

You have produced a written analysis of the case study using the SWOT framework for your writing and you introduce each section well. You have also structured your writing to include a recommendations section at the end. The structure of your paragraphs is good and you clearly follow the framework.

When making recommendations in the future, you **might want to say** where the ideas have come from. For structure, you **might want to try** beginning a sentence with, 'It is recommended that?' so that you make the recommendation first and then follow it with the source. That way you are using the high level generalisation and low level detail structure you have been taught and you are meeting the purpose of the question and the task.

# Examples of tutor feedback



## Greg's tutor feedback (Assignment 2)

### **B: Structure and development of the text: 13/25**

The TMA question asked you to 'analyse a business case study by applying a SWOT framework of analysis? [...] **You have produced a written analysis of the case study, but try to follow** the framework of the SWOT and **to keep** to that order. **You have structured your writing to include a recommendations section at the end, but** it is a bullet pointed list. **Try to select** two or three recommendations and to explain them fully.

There are **some problems** with your linkage and with the problem-solution patterns. **Have a look** at Session 4 on problem-solution patterns and cause and effect structures and at my comments on your script. Here's an example, A strength of Brompton Bicycle is its British branding which arises from its location in London and which suggests traditional values and quality engineering. [...]



# Student writing development

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- Use of key concepts to frame paragraphs
- Genre awareness (summary and case study analysis) found though varied among students
- Significant difference between the demands of two assignments (summary vs case study analysis)
- Students able to implement the tutor feedback on presentation issues (e.g., double-spacing and adding personal details) and referencing reasonably well,
- However, not seemed to improve their text structure and design (e.g., framing the text with the SWOT framework) and the style of writing in the same way

# Student writing development

## Student text complexity

Students	TMA1 CEFR Level	TMA2 CEFR Level	TMA1 metadiscourse	TMA2 metadiscourse
Celine	Upper C1	C2	limited	Wide-ranging
Dave	Upper C1	C2	limited	Wide-ranging
Greg	Upper C1	Upper C1	limited	quite wide-ranging
Han	Upper C1	C2	limited	Wide-ranging
Helen	Upper C1	C2	very limited (3)	Wide-ranging
Josh	Upper C1	C2	quite wide-ranging(8)	wide-ranging
Sarah	Upper C1	C2	limited	Wide-ranging
Tim	Upper C1	C2	limited	Wide-ranging

# Examples of student writing

## Celine's first assignment & second assignment

### Assignment 1

The ever-expanding global market for folding bicycles has enormous potential, and Will Butler-Adams, the new managing director of Brompton Bicycle, knows that his sales forecast of 19,000 units for this year is vastly lower than his competitors' figures; Brompton Bicycle needs to see a dramatic sales increase to remain competitive.

*There are several reasons why Brompton's sales are not higher.* Firstly, the company has a lengthy and inefficient production line, which has meant that not only has supply simply not met demand, but also that the market has progressed much [...]

### Assignment 2

The following is a SWOT analysis based on the case study of Brompton Bicycle. It examines the internal and external environment of the organisation and offers recommendations about future decisions to achieve business success.

#### SWOT TABLE

*Brompton Bicycle has a number of strengths;* possibly one of the most important is that it has strong brand values and an excellent reputation. The organisation is certain that in any event, it will not compromise on the quality of the product or on the service it provides its customers. This attitude encourages [...]

# Examples of student writing

## Greg's first assignment & second assignment

Assignment 1	Assignment 2
<p>The new management must move quickly to <u>increase sales and boost profits</u>. The New managing director, Will Butler-Adams is concerned that <u>the slow production time is failing to keep up with demand and is damaging brand name</u>. The company is currently going through a management and production change and is hoping to triple output and market growth.</p> <p>Although <u>Trademark patents have expired the fundamental design has copyright protection</u>. The prominent threat from <u>low-wage Taiwanese competitors</u>, and <u>low priced bikes could prevent future growth</u>. Prices are determined by the cost of raw materials, brand image and the need to <u>retain profit margins</u>.</p>	<p><b>Summary &amp; Introduction:</b></p> <p>In this analysis, I hope to help you understand the current issues and problems of Brompton Bicycle. <i>The obvious problems affecting the business is: high production time, growing competition, external environment due to the current economic climate, inconsistency in the production process, a dated product, reduced spending by customers, Taiwanese cheap labour and the possible mass production by competitors.</i></p> <p>This is a SWOT analysis based on the case study provided by Brompton Bicycles. Brompton Bicycle has a number of strengths with probably the globally recognised brand being the most important. In most cases, the generic bicycle is often referred to by many as the “Brompton”, which is a huge benefit to the Brompton Bicycle Company when consumers are purchasing this type of product. This recognisable ‘Copyrighted’ brand (Smith 2008) helps keep Brompton Bicycle a player in the rapidly expanding global market.</p>

# Conclusion and implications

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- A strong interpersonal dimension inherent in formative feedback
- Formative feedback beyond Hyland & Hyland's (2006) *praise/ criticise/ suggest* → plus Encourage/ Acknowledge/Recap
- For high formative value of early assignments, crucial to have similar assignment tasks
- Use of uniform formative feedback framework essential to provide similar student learning experience/ opportunity, hence institutional initiative pivotal
- Feedback language to minimise meta-language, following Lea and Street (1998), Walker (2009) and Hyland (2013)

# Conclusion and implications

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- Essential to refer students back to previous feedback to maintain a dynamic feedback dialogue (Shrestha & Coffin 2012)
- More contextual information and examples needed in formative feedback
- Need for personalised targeted feedback to help with writing development
- Limitation of the survey data due to size, thus a larger number of students need to be surveyed in future studies
- Need for examining diverse type of students' writing development and feedback given to them
- Longitudinal studies needed to examine the impact of tutor feedback on student learning/ academic literacy development





**Questions and comments?**

**Thank you!**

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 **@pnshrestha**

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